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Moral Education and the Construction of Meaning

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ABSTRACT *In this article, I develop the idea that the starting point of moral education is formed by the affective commitments individuals make in the course of growing up. The task of education is to enable children to critically consider and revise these commitments, as part of the development of a reflective personal identity. Ethical concepts like justice as well as other culturally developed 'instruments' may be taught in order to structure the discursive development of identity. This points to a view of moral education that differs from the two approaches that are now most popular.*

Introduction

Moral and citizenship education are high on the agenda of politicians and educators alike. Not all reasons given for this prominence may be equally sound (is it really true that youth criminality has risen so much?) and it may also be that moral education will not solve the real problem (is disinterest in democracy related to failing education or to a crisis in democracy itself?), but the fact remains that moral development and education is an important topic for the field of education, and certainly also for educational studies. It is, moreover, a topic that has been discussed since ancient times and on which a wealth of material is available. It is all the more surprising, then, that there are virtually no studies of this topic that are explicitly based in a sociocultural or neo-Vygotskian point of view, which stresses the importance of the cultural context of development and actions. Until now, I have been able to unearth only some contributions by Mark Tappan (Tappan, 1991, 1998; Day & Tappan, 1996; Tappan & Brown, 1998) and another one by Paul Crawford (Crawford, 2001) that explicitly refer to the Vygotskian tradition. Of course, work has been done in a wider philosophical field that is germane to a sociocultural view (e.g. Benhabib, 1992) and I will be making some use of it. However, most of that work is concerned with the legitimation of moral values rather than directly with education.

I cannot hope, of course, to formulate here a fully developed sociocultural view of moral development and education. I will confine myself to mentioning a few principles that I consider relevant for thinking about these topics along sociocultural lines. The contributions by Tappan and Crawford provide a good starting point, Tappan showing how narratives mediate moral experience and are internalized in the zone of proximal development, and Crawford extending this view by pointing out analogies between the several forms of conceptual thinking Vygotsky discerned on

the one hand, and forms of moral action and decision-making on the other hand. However, I think it is necessary first to give some attention to the nature of what is called moral behaviour.

Both Tappan and Crawford at least give the impression (and Tappan seems to state so directly) that moral action is a specific class or domain of activities, which could then be distinguished from e.g. instrumental action. It is an activity, in their view, that is explicitly concerned with moral issues—e.g. discussing the morality of war, or of a decision taken earlier. As a consequence, according to them acting morally can be learned separately from other forms of activity, by taking part in such discussions. They share this position with the majority of scholars from other traditions in thinking about moral education. Much of this thinking relies on first identifying a desired end point for moral development, e.g. a post-conventional stance or critical-democratic citizenship, and then looking for educational procedures to reach this end. In this contribution, I will use a slightly different approach to morality and moral education, one that relies on a more developmental view and emphasizes the importance of affect and commitment rather than (moral) cognitions.

Identity and valuation

A central feature of sociocultural theory (that it shares with other approaches) is that human beings are meaning-givers. Each individual attaches personal meaning to objects, persons, situations, and practices, and to themselves in relation to all these. They do so whenever they encounter them in the course of their activities. These meanings are not neutral; they arise out of, and are imbued with, emotions related to the role they play in an activity the individual is engaged in, and thus they represent the individual's valuations rather than objective 'knowledge' (Bonnett & Cuypers, 2003). Meanings represent not only how we think the world is, but also, and maybe primarily, how we do, or do not, care about such objects etc. They are the products of our experiences with the world. Note that such meanings are not always verbal concepts; in many cases they belong (at least initially) to the domain of 'tacit knowledge' that is largely non-verbal. It may be even better to say that meanings are not solely 'in the mind' at all; for the individual, they become 'located' in the objects etc. themselves, so that any encounter with them triggers the attached meanings and valuations. In that sense, the outside world guides (but does not determine) the individual's actions not only in its purely physical aspects.

As these meanings represent a relation between the subject and the world, 'giving meaning' implies at the same time building a personal identity, which actually is a personal way of relating to the world. Identity, too, is initially non-verbal and largely implicit. Thus, learning about the world by experience is not something different from building a personal identity: these are two sides of the same process.

The earlier description is slightly misleading in that it gives the impression that meaning-making is a strictly individual, and maybe even idiosyncratic, process. This, however, is not the case. Other people with whom the individual interacts point out the objects etc. to which meaning is to be attached, they show their own valuations and their valuation of the individual's valuations, they value the individual's developing identity in a certain way. And in doing so, they in turn do not express just idiosyncratic valuations, but partly at least those a community of practice has developed in its history of creating ways to realize its goals in a resisting world.

(Such practices are not only those of work or school; any human goal-directed activity takes the form of a cultural practice, that is, has a historical and cultural form.) 'In our self-definition and self-evaluation we have to take as a background a sense of what is significant independently of our autonomous will' say Bonnett and Cuypers (2003, p. 334), paraphrasing Charles Taylor (1992). Learning about the world and building an identity are fundamentally social processes. This however should not be taken as a strict socialization process: the meanings an individual makes depend also on prior experience, connect with earlier valuations, and are also related to pre-existing (but not necessarily unchangeable) personality characteristics. 'The existential identity of a person and his or her self-esteem are not built in a monological, but in a dialogical way' (Bonnett & Cuypers 2003, p. 334); meanings and identity are co-constructions. Growing up and education are neither a matter of (creating opportunities for) autonomous self-realization nor of passive socialization; they are best seen as a process of individuation in which the individual identity gradually takes shape. Note that 'education' does not especially refer to schools here; on the contrary, the existing school system in Western countries inhibits rather than enables the individuation process, by all but excluding personal out-of-school experiences from curricular processes.

Certainly in the early years of an individual's life, but later too, many valuations originate 'behind our backs', non-consciously and without intent, as a result of emotions being coupled with (social) experiences, and/or of taking over the social valuations already inherent in language use (for language, in a sense, constitutes experience instead of the other way round) (Day & Tappan, 1996). Thus, they may guide the individual's actions in an unreflected way. It is the growing command of language that makes reflection possible and with it, the capability of directing one's own behaviour and changing the original valuations. We build 'identity stories' about our behaviour and our relation to the world and to ourselves, and use these to monitor and guide our own behaviour in a heuristic way (Holland *et al.*, 1998). In these stories, we strive for a certain (context-related) consistency. This can only be effective if the language signs we use are appropriated, that is, we make selective use of available language resources and 'personalize' them with a valuative content. This process of reflecting on our valuation and trying to find 'labels' for them that have a social origin but are connected with personal valuative emotions will especially take place when the subject is confronted with a situation in which 'old' and hitherto unreflected valuations get in the way of desired participation in social practices (Wardekker & Meijers, submitted for publication). In modern society, where stable social structures have dissolved and people need to participate in ever changing practices, such revisions are necessary and subjects need to be able to use specific 'identity strategies' in order to maintain a reflective and effective narrative identity (Giddens, 1991).

Valuation and morality

In all of the earlier discussions, I have not yet broached the subject of morality. But it is already implicated in the whole pattern. Some remarks follow to make this clear.

First of all, moral behaviour is not primarily a separate type or class of behaviour. Nor is it primarily a practice or an activity (in the Leontiev sense) by itself. Rather, morality is a quality of actions within a social activity, and of their outcomes. It is

to do with taking responsibility for your actions and for your participation in practices, especially as they affect other people. However, the moral quality of actions can be reflected upon, either by ourselves or together with others. In this process, the valuations that guide our actions, and the narratives that structure these valuations, come under scrutiny and may be changed. This reflection process may be termed 'moral activity'. This is, I gather, what Tappan (1998) refers to when speaking of morality as an activity. He points out that very often this reflection process does not make use of the type of concepts that are generally considered to refer to morality, like respect, justice, or honesty; it takes place in what he calls 'vernacular language'. That is, speaking and reflecting about moral issues is speaking about the things one considers important, that one feels committed to. The type of concepts just referred to constitute what may be called 'scientific concepts' in the Vygotskian sense: language tools developed in the course of history to guide and assist our thinking about moral matters. Acquiring such concepts makes a more structured type of reflection and discussion possible, partly because of their referral to principles of moral discourse and action that are considered valid. They do not, however, constitute morality. They will only have a real effect on a person's actions if their use in reflection leads to changes in that person's identity narratives, which implies that changes in valuations, in the affects attached to the world and to oneself, have to be effected.

This is one way of saying that morality and responsibility need an affective basis: one is only prepared and able to take responsibility about situations, things, persons and activities that matter. There is no morality without empathy. This may well be the greater problem in our present society and accordingly for education. The inability or unwillingness to live morally (or even to keep to social rules), which is noted and deplored by many politicians and educators, may stem not from a failure to provide young people with (knowledge of) proper values, but from their inability to identify with and feel empathy for existing societal arrangements and/or people living within them. And this is not easily remedied. In many cases, a feeling that our actions (e.g. voting) have no real impact because the power of decision does not lie with the institutions for which we can vote, or that these institutions themselves may be immoral or at least act in an immoral way, is based on reality. Moreover, as Conroy (2003) suggests, even in situations where our actions can have a real impact, it is often unclear where our responsibility lies. Most social situations, and most people with whom we interact, are so complex that a clear course of action is impossible. Morality is possible only on the basis of insight in the fundamental complexity and ambiguity of human existence.

Morality and responsibility suppose the possibility of choice. Young children are unable to act morally by themselves; when they participate in social practices, the moral aspect of their actions (together with many of the more technical aspects) will be taken care of by more adult participants. It is exactly in this way, where novices are treated 'as if' they could fully participate in social practices, that they learn to become more central participants (Lave & Wenger, 1991); this principle holds true for the moral aspects of behaviour too. However, even adults do not always realize they are making such choices. There is nothing inherently moral or immoral about the valuations that are attached to experiences. Even though they are dialogical in nature, and thus may represent the moral values of a community or at least of other persons, they can only be considered moral if they become part of an acknowledged way of life. 'Being moral is more than simply a matter of acquiescing

in a certain moral code: it involves a personal commitment to a particular way of life' (Bonnett & Cuypers, 2003, p. 337). Purely keeping to the 'way of life', the mores of a community, discipline without commitment, does not constitute moral behaviour.

Reflection on the moral quality of actions is triggered especially where conflicts arise about action decisions. In many situations where decisions have to be taken, conflicting valuations and rules come into play. Such conflicts are not resolved by reference to a stable pyramid of values residing in one's mind, nor as a result of acquired character traits. Instead, identity narratives are used in a tentative and heuristic way, either to come to a decision or (if there is no time for that) to legitimize the decision taken. The question asked is something like, 'Am I the kind of person who ...'; but it may also take a different form, as in the case mentioned by Nucci (2001) of somebody who habitually asked what his (deceased) grandfather would have done in such a situation. As Nucci makes clear, such decisions are often not of a moral character in the strict sense. Nucci distinguishes three domains of values that may play a role: morality in the strict sense (which is to do with the effects of our actions on the well-being of other people, either directly or indirectly), conventional rules, and personal interests (e.g. pleasure or gain motives). Maybe a fourth domain should be added to these: the values that are constitutive for certain practices, such as truth in the case of science. (The boundaries between domains are fuzzy and depend both on societal circumstances and personal interpretations.) Conflicts may arise both within and between these domains. In the case of a conflict between the domain of morality and other domains, the specific situation may well lead a person to give prevalence to a non-moral value, e.g. choosing for immediate personal gain instead of the well-being of another person. Morality is never an automatism. The question is whether the subject is able and willing to take responsibility for their decisions, and this willingness is the outcome of a process of moral reflection which can and must be learned.

Although this formulation seems to open the way to all sorts of value relativism, this is not really the case. Responsibility is a dialogical concept: when one takes responsibility, this has to be recognized by others. Authority, too, points at an audience that is willing to listen. As Tappan (1991, p. 13) says, 'Individuals are [...] responsible, accountable, and answerable for their own actions, not because they are independent, autonomous agents acting on their own in the world, but rather because it is only through dialogues and relationships with others that the authority and responsibility of self can be constituted in the first place'. And these others, the audience, participate in the same social activities as the individual taking responsibility. Thus, these principles embody a moral heuristic: those actions are to be preferred that enhance the dialogue, and make a better social practice possible. Tappan, referring to Habermas, even maintains that dialogue is inherently moral. This point of view has been developed by Benhabib (1992) into a communicative ethics: a moral decision cannot be reached in an abstract dialogue, but only in a concrete dialogue of concrete persons who are willing and able to observe the regulative principles inherent in dialogue. However, it is true that such a dialogue will not ensure that its participants act morally under all circumstances. A value concept like 'respect' only takes on action meaning in a specific practice context; but in that context, the choice a person makes from a number of action alternatives (if indeed a reasoned choice can be made) will always depend on several valuations.

Problems of moral education

Taking into account the earlier description of how people make decisions that have moral quality and how such qualities develop, it appears that the types of moral education most popular at the moment do not take all sides into account. Learning moral reasoning, the Kohlberg approach, is useful in coming to understand intellectually what scientific concepts like justice mean, and so can help in reflection on the moral quality of actions and decisions by providing intellectual instruments for reflection (and this remains true even if one does not accept Kohlberg's claim for the universal validity of such values). However, it supposes that decisions are actually taken in a rational and deliberate way, and does not take the emotional and valuative background of decisions into account. Coming to a decision is not just a matter of sound reasoning, and in making decisions we do not refer to value concepts as such, but to our identity narratives in which our experiences 'personalize' these concepts with affects. There is, then, a real risk that the scientific concepts will not develop into what Vygotsky called 'real concepts', that is, concepts invested with personal valuations (cf. Wardekker, 1998) and related to personal experiences. In that case, moral reasoning as learned in school will, for the learners, be just another trick to be learned for the benefit of good marks, and not have any systematic impact on their own existence. Moreover, this approach normally disregards the importance of value domains other than the moral, which does not contribute to its usability in real life situations.

The second popular approach, character education (e.g. Lickona, 1993), appears to be the opposite of the moral reasoning approach. The idea is exactly to establish in the learners a sort of automatic emotional response to morally laden situations. Students are tackled about conduct that does not conform to norms that are supposedly uncontested, they are given stories and other examples of morally acceptable behaviour, and teachers are supposed to act as role models. The aim of the Character Counts Coalition, for instance, is to produce a 'person of character' who 'is trustworthy, treats all people with respect, acts responsibly, is fair and just, and is a good citizen' (Center for the 4th and 5th R's, 2003). However, this type of education does hardly take its point of departure in the learner's own pre-existing valuations, and thus runs a real risk of becoming oppressively moralizing. The effect of this may well be that learners resist this pressure, either because it comes from teachers who represent the type of school tasks that they have learned to dodge as much as possible, or because they see that in their actual behaviour, not a lot of people do realize this kind of values unrestrictedly. Also, a 'person of character' is clearly not somebody who has learned to reflect critically on their own behaviour or that of others, which implies the risk that the values that constitute the 'character' are those chosen by a powerful group, and that learners do not acquire the kind of reflective abilities directed at their own identity narratives that are necessary in modern society. All in all, character education does have conservative overtones.

Both approaches also have some problems in common. First of all, they do not acknowledge the fact that terms referring to values only acquire specific meaning in a specific situation, and that such a situation may well give rise to conflicting interests and values. These conflicts are real, and cannot just be solved by correct reasoning or by relying on the intuitions afforded by 'character'. Indeed, in many situations it is not clear at all what the best (in a moral sense) decision would be, and such decisions require later reflection. We need values exactly because it is so often

necessary to make choices between different and conflicting interests. At the same time, because it is so often unclear what the 'best' moral decision would be, we need to be able to live and cope with moral uncertainty. Both are aspects of what has been called social or action competence.

Secondly, both approaches seem to ignore the fact that decisions are seldom made alone, as the product of an individual rationality. They suppose that the subject, the acting person, has a discretionary space, that is, the possibility to make decisions and to act on them. Often however, that possibility is severely restricted because others engaged in the same practice also act, making decisions or even usurping all of the discretionary space so that one can only follow another person's decisions. These decisions will not always conform to the subject's sense of what is moral. Also, rules and prescriptions may, in the perception of the subject, leave little or no space for decisions. And even where such coercion by existing rules or by others does not apply, it is often both necessary and possible to confer with others, to negotiate about the meaning of a situation and the values that should be followed. As a consequence of their individualistic stance, both approaches all but ignore the moral qualities of the greater social contexts in which individuals live, and hardly teach learners to think critically about the morality of societal conditions. They are directed towards conventionality rather than to the fostering of dialogue or moral resistance.

Thirdly, both approaches divorce moral education from education in 'knowledge' subjects. Morality, however, is not a separate subject or a separate field of human activity. As it rests in the valuations attached to the knowledge of objects, persons, situations, and practices, and these valuations are formed when learning about these, any reflection on the moral quality of actions has to be related to the original knowledge and its personal valuation. Therefore, moral education must not be something 'new' to the learners; it should connect from the beginning to their own experiences and their own valuations.

Ideas for moral education

From these comments on other approaches, we can begin to construct our own view of moral education. As I mentioned before, I am not going to construct a full and consistent model here; I will just mention some points I think are important to start a process of thinking and discussion. The point of departure for this process is my position that moral education is concerned with enabling students to critically consider and revise their own commitments in a discursive process, with the help of, among other things, the 'scientific concepts' of ethics, as a part of their reflective construction of their identity narratives.

From the third point earlier, it follows that it does not make much sense to confine moral education in schools to separate lessons or courses. Admittedly, separate lessons can be of value for learning to use the 'scientific concepts' I talked about; but even so, these lessons need to be related to actual experiences of learners. However, when such experiences form the starting point and content of separate lessons, this may cause the field of morality to be perceived as totally separate from other courses in the school, and indeed provides an excuse not to talk about moral implications in such other lessons.

However, this does not imply that moral education in schools is impossible or has to be dependent on chance experiences of individual learners. To a certain extent, schools can make relevant experiences happen. Providing such experiences,

however, requires a curriculum that does not aim just at the acquisition of knowledge and skills but at the introduction of learners in selected cultural and societal practices. This is what such approaches as dual learning, project method, and the like are, or ought to be, about. In other words, adequate moral education supposes a transformation of the curriculum such that learners are enabled to have authentic experiences and value the things they learn in relation to their possible position in such practices. If the curriculum is organized around the participation in practices, moral questions related to the complexities, problems and conflicts in such practices will present themselves along with opportunities to learn knowledge and skills.

Of course, such a curriculum is not the same thing as learning directly in a workplace. Educational institutions have a dual obligation here: to ensure that learners are safe and also feel safe, both physically and emotionally; and to ensure that there is adequate time and opportunity to reflect and discuss on experiences. These conditions are necessary for learners to be able to see themselves as part of a practice on the one hand, and not be totally immersed in it on the other hand. If an actual practice does not provide such opportunities, they may be simulated in school. Also, the school should whenever necessary, offer opportunities to concentrate on learning necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes. I am certainly not advocating to do away with such elements, but to structure the curriculum in such a way that learners can always relate what they are learning to experiences in practices. In contrast, the 'standard' curriculum often provides learners with knowledge and skills, but expects them to make the relation with practices themselves, and often much later in their lives. Such a curricular structure is detrimental both to the possibility for learners to make sense of what they are learning and to their engagement with practices and the communities related to them, of which moral engagement is an important element.

Thus, from a sociocultural perspective, the conditions for adequate moral education are primarily the same as those for education in general: participation in cultural practices coupled with systematic reflection, aided by scientific concepts used as instruments for reflection, but always related to the experiential valuations of learners. However, we need to be careful about tying education to existing cultural practices. The aim of general education cannot be to prepare learners for working in specific practices and learning the rules accepted in those practices. This is especially the case for economic practices (work), but it is also a more general principle. For one thing, schools can never prepare learners for every existing practice. Some sort of generalizing effect has to be invoked, where learning in and by specific practices leads to the general idea of citizenship. The question to be asked is thus, what do we learn by participating in specific practices that can also serve as a general principle in other practices. Actually, the question should probably be a touchstone for the curriculum: it should introduce learners only in those practices where such wider principles can be discerned, and reflection should be directed towards those aspects. Thus, one should ask what practices enable learners to encounter and adopt principles for living and working together that we think are applicable in other practices, and ultimately in general citizenship.

Such application, however, is not just a question of generalizing from a number of concrete experiences to a more general or abstract principle. Rather, students need to construct the tools that can be used to explore and solve the (moral) problems they may encounter in different situations. Schools need to provide these tools (of which

the moral concepts talked about earlier are but one instance) and to provide the opportunity to use them and 'appropriate' them in a variety of situations.

Many existing curricula, however, do not provide such opportunities, as 'preparation for participation in society' often implies presenting a simplified and edited picture of a practice in which the inherent complexities and conflicts have disappeared. This denies learners the opportunities to encounter real moral problems (for instance, which faction to support and for what reasons) and to take a critical stance toward the proceedings in and the future development of a practice. Adequate education should help learners to discern such complexities, to find words, stories and images to talk about them, and to handle them adequately in their actions with the help of all kinds of 'instruments' provided. (Conroy (2003), for instance, makes a case for using poetry to give learners a feeling for such complexity. Here again, it appears that getting a feeling for such things may be at least as important as being able to reason objectively about them.)

All in all, moral education turns out to be just a specific form of helping learners to make personal sense of the world they are living in and act accordingly. In other words, it is an aspect of the task of education in helping learners develop a personal identity. In that sense, it is not separate from general education, but an indispensable aspect of it. It is time, I think, to develop these ideas into a sociocultural research programme.

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